

THE HISPANIC PRESENCE IN AZTLAN/USA

by

Lee A. Daniel

A cursory perusal of U.S. history books reveals that the Hispanic presence in the United States is generally given short shrift despite the fact that, as Duncan points out, the U.S. has ". . . had longer and more intimate ties with Spain and Spanish America than with any other culture."¹ All too often, however, the continuing and multifaceted Hispanic presence in the United States of America is hardly mentioned, if at all.² This oversight is remarkable, considering the Hispanic influence (in the form of language and culture) across a period of almost five hundred years and a vast coast-to-coast stretch of territory. The tacit denial, and the resulting ignorance of the Hispanic presence in the United States, denigrates us as citizens of the U.S. as well as Americans in the Pan-American sense.

One manifestation of this ignorance is seen in the word "American" that is used too often in a myopic way. The country that lies between Canada and Mexico, for want of a better name, is often referred to as America and the inhabitants as "Americans." While we are indeed Americans, so too are the Canadians, Mexicans, the Central Americans and the inhabitants of South America.³ A corrective measure, and an attractive alternative to the word "American" as it is often misused, is "US/American." Second, Hispanics have forged much history (history that antedates Plymouth Rock by more than a 100 years) that is significant to the United States.

It is ironic that we pride ourselves in the United States on being a "melting pot" of the world, while far too long we have chosen not to acknowledge adequately the Hispanics--an important segment of the multifaceted society of the U.S. The purpose of this study, then, is to refresh the memory of US/Americans concerning the Hispanic presence in the U.S. since the beginning of this country, and even before; and, secondly, to attempt to explain why US/Americans tend to ignore that presence.

The Anglo and the Hispanic discovered and settled what is now the United States of America but for different reasons. Florida, for example, was discovered by Spaniards searching for the fabled Fountain of Youth; the futile search for the fabulous Seven Cities of Cibola resulted in the exploration of a large part of the Southwest; the subsequent search for Gran Quivira led the Spanish through what became the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, across the Arkansas River and to a location near present-day Great Bend, Kansas;⁴ and finally, California was discovered by Hispanics seeking an island of that name described in one of the sequels of Amadís de Gaula--a famous Spanish novel of chivalry.⁵ Also, the Mexican Francisco López was the first to discover gold in California in 1842.⁶ In contrast, the English settlers came not to find adventure, romance and wealth, but to escape persecution. A major and basic difference between the two groups can be seen

in the respective models--Pilgrim's Progress and Amadís de Gaula. In a large sense, as is well known, the Pilgrim prevailed over the knight-errant. Nevertheless, descendants of the knights-errant remained in the United States in varying degrees and currently their numbers are being replenished in what some might call "alarming numbers." One expert, for example, has predicted that "a net increase of 500,000 Hispanic newcomers might be expected every year for the rest of this century."⁷

Why, then, if the Spanish discovered and settled significant areas of the U.S. is the Hispanic presence largely ignored? One answer lies in the fact that Spain (a leading military and imperialistic power of the world around the time the U.S. was born) was at odds with Britain, and this hatred and antagonism spread logically to Britain's colonies in the New World. Also, and related, is the leyenda negra (the black legend) created by the Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas. The so-called "Apostle of the Indians," intending only to improve the conditions of the native Americans, unwittingly aided Spain's enemies--the British, Dutch, French, and later the English colonies. The bitter verbal war that Las Casas waged against the Spanish soldiers and settlers had the catching quality of headlines and consequently provided Spain's critics with convincing propaganda to fuel the psychological warfare. The black legend was perpetuated in all forms of writing to create an anti-Hispanic attitude not only in Europe but also in the U.S. where its ultimate culmination was Manifest Destiny.⁸ And, moreover, the anti-Hispanic attitude, aroused by the leyenda negra, was reinforced by fears of Catholic Spain and her nearby colonies, the Inquisition, and the very tangible dread of Spanish naval and military power.⁹ The myths were slow to change and thereby adversely affected the attitude of British Americans towards Spanish Americans for centuries.

With all due deference to early US/Americans, it should be pointed out that alongside the anti-Hispanic sentiment, a friendly attitude toward Spanish culture was fostered by supporters of inter-American cultural relations. These intelligent few--literary and scientific people--maintained scholarly understanding as neighbors. For instance, educated men of the U.S. and the Hispanic countries held membership in scientific societies that fostered cultural ties between the two Americas. Benjamin Franklin and Washington Irving are but two examples of men who were members of inter-American societies. The educated US/Americans also eagerly read books and magazines that dealt with Latin America. One such work, and the first Spanish grammar printed in the U.S., was published in 1741 by Garrat Noel--a bookseller, translator and Spanish teacher.¹⁰ He intended the book for inter-American use, and it was the first of many publications meant to provide information and help for those interested in Spanish-speaking America. Another avenue that led to inter-American relations was Protestantism. Religion was the impetus for the work of two Boston Puritans--Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall--who initiated inter-American cultural history in the United States.¹¹

Cotton Mather, in an attempt to win converts in Latin America to the Puritan form of Protestantism, wrote the first book printed in Spanish in the United States--La Religión Pura en Doze Palabras Fieles, dignas de ser recibidos de Todos (1699). Additionally, the missionary-minded Sewall planned the founding of a New Jerusalem in America, specifically in Mexico City and hoped also to induce Latin America to separate from Spain.¹² In 1704 Sewall requested that the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in London" print ten thousand copies--an enormous edition--of the Spanish Bible and that they "bomb" Santo Domingo, Havana, Puerto Rico and Mexico with it.¹³ However, by this time, eighteenth-century thought began to favor science rather than religion and not until the present century did the Protestant missionary enter Latin America and the Protestant Bible gain any importance.

Thus, since early in the history of the U.S., two currents have vied for ascendancy--(1) the rejection of the leyenda negra and the fostering of inter-American ties and friendship advocated by the scientific and learned societies and (2) the popular prejudices that flourished for years among "the anti-Hispanic mass which knew little and cared less about Latin America"¹⁴ and whose ultimate expression was Manifest Destiny.

The preceding helps to explain why negative attitudes toward Hispanics exist today and why, all too often, Anglos tend to ignore the Hispanic presence in the United States.

Several historical facts, which are often overlooked, need now to be considered in order to provide a perspective on the Hispanic presence in the United States. For example, it is well known that the Italian Columbus, financed by the Spanish Crown, discovered parts of America in 1492. As a consequence, the Spaniards were generally given the distinction of being here first; and the battle of the Alamo with the Hispanic victory, as well as the Hispanic loss in the 1898 Spanish American War that cost Spain the last of her colonial possessions, is common knowledge. However, much history with Hispanic heroes, participating in it or forging it, goes unheralded in history books in the U.S. and therefore never enters the average citizen's mind.

For most Anglos, the history of US/America begins with the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. In view of this shortcoming, one intention in this study is to point out additional history flavored heavily by the Hispanics, and in so doing, provide a more accurate perspective on U.S. history by highlighting the Hispanic presence in Aztlán,¹⁵ or "lands of the north," and in a broader context--the United States.

The 1620 landing of the Pilgrims, generally considered to be a very early historical event in U.S. history, is for most Anglos the first line of that history. But, 108 years earlier, in 1512, Ponce de León discovered what is now the state of Florida.¹⁶ Also, Alfonso de Pineda in 1515 was the first to enter the mouth of the Mississippi,¹⁷ and in 1519, Esteban Gomez explored the New England coastline, Nova Scotia, Cape Cod, Nantucket and perhaps even Chesapeake

Bay. In 1526, still 94 years before the Pilgrims, a Spanish colony was established in South Carolina. In 1539, Hernando de Soto explored Florida, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana--all territory that makes up what is now the United States, discovered and settled 81 years before the Pilgrim's arrival. Between 1539-1542 Vázquez de Coronado explored what are now the states of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and perhaps Nebraska. The Spaniards continued their exploration to Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, the Aleutian Islands, and the Phillipines.¹⁸

Now, having seen that a large part of what came to be the United States was explored first by the Spanish, let us now give attention to specific sites. One is the city of San Augustin, Florida, the first permanent town in North America, founded in 1565 by Menéndez de Avilés.¹⁹ In 1598, Juan Onate founded San Gabriel de los Espanoles, today known as Chamita--the first non-native American colony in the trans-Mississippi west²⁰--nine years before the English settled Jamestown. In fact, in 1526 Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón preceded Sir Walter Raleigh to the Jamestown locality by 81 years and made settlements on the shores of South Carolina and explored as far north as the James River in Virginia.²¹ More to the west is Santa Fe, New Mexico, founded in 1610, a decade before the Pilgrims came. Finally, 108 years after the Spaniards arrived to begin exploring and settling what is now the United States, the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. By the time of the Revolutionary War in the United States, there were already Hispanic settlements in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and California.

In addition to explorers and conquistadores, such as Ponce de León and Cabeza de Vaca, there are other more "American" Hispanics than the just mentioned heroic Europeans from Spain. A good example of this type of early Hispanic hero is the famous Governor of Louisiana--Bernardo Gálvez.²² In 1776 he helped the cause of the thirteen colonies in their struggle for independence from England by selling them arms and munitions, by allowing them to cross into Louisiana, and by permitting them to use the port of New Orleans for the selling of captured boats and goods. Gálvez even equipped an army and led his troops against the British in battles along the Mississippi River, capturing Natchez and other ports. As a result of his military successes, the British were unable to gain control of the Mississippi. Although the name Gálvez may not readily come to mind when compiling a list of names of the heroes of the US/American Revolution, a well-known version of the name does survive yet in Texas. A "Lone Star" state coastal city gets its name from Gálvez--"Gálvez's town" later came to be known as Galveston.

Gálvez is by no means the only Hispanic who distinguished himself militarily in the United States. Numerous Hispanic heroes died defending the Alamo; Juan Sequín led a cavalry charge at the deciding battle at San Jacinto in 1836; and many soldiers of Hispanic origin distinguished themselves in the U.S. Civil War, both World Wars, Korea and most recently, Vietnam.²³

In the remainder of this study, mention will not be made of specific Hispanics of heroic stature such as Gálvez; but emphasis will be given to the completely unsung heroes in

whose hands the Hispanic presence has been passed down through the generations. Unfortunately, and despite the fact that these people have made general contributions, documentation of specific individuals is difficult or impossible.

The vagüero belongs to this mostly invisible group of unsung Hispanics. The buckaroo, the Anglo counterpart, directly borrowed the vagüero's practices, equipment, and much of the vocabulary of the Spanish-Mexican ranching culture. The Hispanics were the first to establish ranchos and to tend cattle on horseback in the United States, and they introduced the practice of branding, which dates from the eight-century-long Moorish occupation of Spain (711-1492).²⁴ Among examples of ranching equipment are the chaparejos (chaps), la reata (lariat) and, of course, the wide-brimmed sombrero. These notable examples of the gear of the early Hispanic presence are still apparent even in the last decades of the twentieth century. The famous Texas longhorns were introduced by the Mexicans in 1716, and we today use the Spanish word rodeo to describe a popular sport. Finally, the mythology of the "Wild West," in general, is largely northern Mexican in origin.²⁵

Besides ranching, the Spanish, and later the Mexicans, contributed much to agriculture. They brought the first cattle, horses, goats, pigs, cats, and barnyard fowl to the Southwest. The first wheels to turn on United States soil were made by the Spaniards.²⁶ In an heroic effort, and against great odds, the Hispanics brought the first hoes, spades, grinding stones, plows and other tools to the United States and the Southwest in particular. It should be noted that there is no product contributed to the agriculture of the United States by the English that the Hispanics had not planted earlier. Another example of the Hispanic presence, found on an object so symbolic of the United States, is the inscription upon the Statue of Liberty. The famous words on the statue, "Give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses" etc. were written by Emma Lazarus, an Hispanic (hispana sefardita).²⁷ Another bit of trivia, which might be surprising, is that in a small Spanish church (a church with a Spanish-speaking congregation in Rhode Island), George Washington proclaimed freedom of religion for the United States.²⁸

The Hispanic presence is evident in the United States in even the food we eat. For example, the very popular Mexican food chains in the U.S. specialize in enchiladas, tamales, tortillas and who has not tried chile con carne?²⁹ And these words bring to mind numerous others borrowed from the Spanish such as city and state names, given names and other words such as plaza and patio that are so anglicized that many don't even consider them as foreign words in English.

The liberal sprinkling of Spanish words in the English language is an example of the Hispanic presence that has been a factor for over a century. A more recent example of the Hispanic presence is politics. Politics is fertile ground for the emerging and future Hispanic presence in the U.S. Of the three so-called "Hispanic" states--California (4.5 million [19 percent of the superstate]), New York (1.7 million), and Texas (3 million), only the latter seems to have real Hispanic power

at this time. One example of a successful Hispanic in politics is San Antonio's charismatic mayor, Henry Cisneros. Elected in 1981, he became the first Mexicano to capture city hall. Despite holding public office, the thirty-seven year old still teaches public administration at the San Antonio branch of the University of Texas because the salary of the mayor of San Antonio is fifty dollars a week.

Another important Hispanic in politics is Miami's mayor, Maurice Ferré, originally from Puerto Rico. He has been mayor of Miami since 1973. Among other notable Hispanic politicians is Toney Anaya, governor of New Mexico and Federico Pena, mayor of Denver, who won in 1983 in a city where only 19% of the population is Hispanic.³⁰ Also, there are currently nine Hispanics in the U.S. House of Representatives. One final personality, although not an elected politician, is César Chávez, an activist of the "United Farm Workers" and an Hispanic leader with national charisma. Also, the latest census figures show that Hispanics are currently residing in all 50 states and that their numbers are increasing. Due to the large and growing numbers of Hispanics, and coupled with their desire to better themselves, it seems it is only a matter of time until the Hispanics emerge as a strong political force.

Among entertainers, both cultural and sports, the Hispanic presence is obvious. In sports there is Lee Trevino and Nancy López in golf, Pancho González in tennis, and Roberto Clemente in baseball. Among the movie and theatre stars figure José Ferrer, Richardo Montalban, Vicki Carr, Anthony Quinn, Erik Estrada and many others. One of the most outstanding and enduring stars is Rita Moreno. She has won all four top awards of entertainment in competition: an "Oscar" for her film performance, a "Tony" for stage excellence, a "Grammy" for recording, and an "Emmy" for her TV achievement. Also, there is the international idol of the opera, Plácido Domingo. He is the Hispanic tenor of the Metropolitan Opera who was born in Spain and reared in Mexico but now resides in the United States. Also, Julio Iglesias, who has called Miami, Florida home since 1978, is an international singing star who has stormed the U.S. music scene with great success.

In summary, the Hispanics were the first explorers and settlers of the United States. They founded San Augustin, Florida in 1565 and Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1610 and both cities antedate any other European settlement. The Hispanics have also contributed militarily to the U.S. with men such as Bernardo Gálvez, an Hispanic hero of the US/American Revolution. He is only one of a long line of military heroes. The Mexican cowboy contributed greatly to the cattle industry through its practices and language and to a popular sport, rodeo. U.S. agriculture also shows influences of the early Hispanic presence. Currently, Hispanic entertainers, sports figures, literary luminaries, and politicians continue to contribute to the US/American way of life while preserving an Hispanic flavor.

This present view of the past Hispanic presence in the United States provides a means to gain a better perspective on

the Hispanics. Nevertheless, it could be that the greatest Hispanic presence is yet to be. This is based on the sheer numbers of Hispanics in the U.S. and the projections that the Hispanic population will increase dramatically over the next few years. A continuation of the high birth rates among current Hispanic residents, coupled with the entrance of about 500,000 new Hispanics into the United States annually, could cause the number living in the U.S. to reach 35 million by the year 2000. This 12% of the total population, then, would make the Hispanics the largest US/American "minority" group and a formidable political and social force. However, at this time, there are differences among the Hispanics; that is, they are not currently one single and united group. For instance, ethnically and historically, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans (the three largest Hispanic groups in the U.S.) differ one from the other as much as do the Irish, the English, and the Scots. However, these people, as well as the numerous other Hispanic groups, do share a common language. It should be noted, also, that there are greater differences in the food, history, and culture of the various Hispanic groups than in the Spanish they speak. Maintaining the Hispanic culture and speaking Spanish is perceived by some to be "anti-American." However, this practice is in reality considerably more positive than negative.

The previously mentioned mayor of Miami, Ferré, contends that language, as well as religion, family and tradition are essential components of pride, and it is pride in one's culture that is important in solving a people's problems. He feels that citizenship, not language, is what makes us all "Americans." It should be noted at this time also that nowhere does the U.S. Constitution specify that English is the official language of the country. John Naisbit in the huge best-seller, Megatrends, Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives (1984) writes that "to be successful [in the United States], you will have to be trilingual: fluent in English, Spanish, and computer."³¹ Therefore, the Spanish language or bilingualism for that matter, is not a problem, and Hispanics generally do want to be US/Americans, whether speaking Spanish or English. It would seem that the successful Hispanic leader of the future will be the one who insures that all Hispanics enter into the mainstream of US/American life and culture, while maintaining their identity in order to contribute to and have a beneficial impact on the United States, the most successful multiethnic society of the Americas and of the world.

NOTES

1. Robert M. Duncan, "The Impact of Hispanic Culture on the United States," in A Handbook for Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, ed. Donald D. Walsh (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1969), 114. Duncan qualifies the statement with "Except for our relations with Great Britain."

2. Carl Allsup, "Who Done It? The Theft of Mexican-American History," Journal of Popular Culture 17 (Winter 1983): 150. Allsup writes, "The history of the United States has not incorporated the

participation and contribution of all Americans. The myths that have emerged create a popular view or conception quite apart from reality. Often justification replaces fact."

3. Claudia Dreifus, "Playboy Interview: Gabriel García Márquez," Playboy 30 (February 1983): 67. This interview is summarized in the "Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian World" section of Hispania 66 (May 1983): 281.

4. Michael M. Smith, The Mexicans in Oklahoma (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 2. See my reviews of this volume in Westview (Fall 1981), 51-52 and The OFLTA Bulletin (September 1984), 477-478.

5. Zenia Sacks da Silva, "La Hispanidad en los Estados Unidos," Hispania 58 (March 1975): 41.

6. Carey McWilliams, North From Mexico (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 134.

7. Thomas B. Morgan, "The Latinization of America," Esquire 93 (May 1983): 48.

8. Harry Bernstein, Making an Inter-American Mind (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1961), 2. Bernstein writes, "The Black Legend was put down in wartime tracts, peacetime books, pamphlets, histories, sermons, essays, dramatic poetry, state papers, and eighteenth-century 'scientific' works."

9. Ibid., 2.

10. Ibid., 3.

11. Ibid., 6.

12. Ibid., 7.

13. Ibid., 8.

14. Ibid., 34.

15. An Aztec legend gives "Aztlán" (lands of the north) as the place where the Aztecs originated. Geographically, Aztlán was roughly the land area that is today known as the Southwest. The term has been used recently in the "Plan Espiritual de Aztlán" that originated in the "Cruzada por la Justicia" conference held in Denver, Colorado in 1969.

16. da Silva, "La Hispanidad," 41.

17. Edward Tomlinson, Look Southward, Uncle (New York: The Devin-Adair Co., 1962), 224.

18. da Silva, "La Hispanidad," 41.

19. Ibid.

20. McWilliams, North From Mexico, 134.

21. Tomlinson, Look Southward, Uncle, 224.

22. da Silva, "La Hispanidad," 43.

23. Smith, "The Mexicans in Oklahoma," 63.
24. Ibid., 5.
25. McWilliams, North From Mexico, 151.
26. da Silva, "Las Hispanidad," 42.
27. Ibid., 44.
28. Ibid.
29. Lee A. Daniel, "Nahuatlisms in Everyday Spanish in Mexico and the United States," Spanish Today (March 1982), 6.
30. Thomas Teal, "Smile High City," New Republic 188 (June 1983): 10.
31. John Naisbit, Megatrends, Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1984), 78.